

**Testimony before the Judiciary Committee  
March 12, 2012  
Support for HB 5432  
AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL-BASED ARRESTS**

Good afternoon Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Daniela Giordano, and I am the Public Policy Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI-CT). I am here today on behalf of NAMI-CT to testify in support of HB 5432- An Act Concerning School-Based Arrests.

I would like to thank the Committee for raising HB 5432. This bill would provide communities with better data about the number of school-based arrests in each school as well as require the creation of formal written agreements detailing the roles and responsibilities of school resource officers. Both of these actions will help to reduce inappropriate arrests and help Connecticut communities create interventions that will keep kids in school and out of the juvenile justice system.

It is widely recognized that twenty percent of all children have a diagnosable mental health condition. However, only a quarter of these children have access to the services they need and deserve. That leaves about 90,000 Connecticut schoolchildren who have emotional-behavioral problems with their needs unmet. Simultaneously, too many Connecticut children are arrested at school, many of whom are very young including children as young as 10 years old. Often, these arrests occur for low-level, non-violent offenses, such as breach of peace and disorderly conduct. Many of the behaviors exhibited by children that lead to school-based arrests are often the result of unmet behavioral and mental health needs; 65-70% of youth in juvenile detention have a diagnosable behavioral health condition<sup>1</sup>.

Keeping children in school is crucial to improving their long-term opportunities. Students who feel connected to school are less likely to use illegal substances, become pregnant, engage in violent behavior, or attempt suicide. Rather than arresting children for their behavioral troubles, we must work together to address the unmet needs of children with emotional-behavioral conditions. We must provide these children with appropriate mental

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<sup>1</sup> Shufelt, J.S.&Cocozza, J.C. (2006). *Youth with mental health disorders in the juvenile justice system: Results from a multi-state, multi-system prevalence study*. Delmar, NY: National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice; Teplin, L. Abram, K., McClelland, G., Dulcan, M.&Mericle, A. (2002). *Psychiatric disorders in youth in juvenile detention*. Archives of the General Psychiatry, 59, 1133-1143.

health services within our public schools. In doing so, we can effectively respond to students' behavioral challenges rather than introducing young people into the juvenile justice system who don't need to be there.

The Keep the Promise Children's Committee, of which NAMI-CT is a part, recently hosted a School Based Mental Health Summit, which highlighted the good work going on in different parts of the state to integrate mental health services for youth into schools. The Summit was well attended. The Coalition recommends (1) training school staff to identify and manage emotional-behavioral problems, (2) increase the number of school social workers and school psychologists, (3) promote school-community partnerships so that our most vulnerable children do not fall between the systems' cracks, and (4) create more comprehensive School Based Health Centers that provide medical and mental health services.

By reducing inappropriate school-based arrest and increasing and expanding mental health services in our schools, we can provide all Connecticut schoolchildren, including the most vulnerable children, with the most effective and humane teaching and learning environment. We owe our children that, and will save money on unnecessary and inappropriate high-cost juvenile justice interventions.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer question you may have.  
Respectfully, Daniela Giordano